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IS GRIT IRRATIONAL FOR AKRATIC AGENTS?

1. Introduction

Contemporary analytic philosophers tend to see akrasia, or acting against one's better judgement, as a problem of motivation. On this standard view, akratic actions are paradoxical since akratic agents know that they have a better alternative but nevertheless take up the worse, akratic option. In other words, akratic agents know what they are doing. They do not make any epistemic mistakes but – inexplicably – engage in behaviours that they correctly identify as wrong. The thought that akratic agents are not flawed as inquirers and knowers but only as agents plays a key role in turning akrasia into a textbook example of motivational only, or practical irrationality.

This paper will aim to revise the standard view by emphasizing the epistemic dimensions of phenomenon, that is, the ways in which akrasia affects both how agents understand their own involvement and how they handle evidence about their prospects of success. The ambition is to show that akratic agents typically rationalise their akrasia. They do not recognise it as paradoxical or irrational. Instead, they reinterpret it as separate goal-directed actions undertaken under conditions that are not ideal for them. This rationalisation of akrasia is closely related to another epistemically deficient habit: akratic agents pay too much heed to evidence that they are unlikely to succeed. In so doing, they display too little of what philosophers have described as 'epistemic resilience', or more simply, 'grit'.

This result is significant for a number of reasons. First, it helps shed light on the relationship between the motivational and the epistemic sides of akrasia. Second, it offers a fuller understanding

of the phenomenon as a multi-faced process that unfolds over time rather than a sequence of paradoxical actions. Third, it avoids issuing of conflicting normative requirements toward agents who, like the akratic, already find themselves in an irrational state.

The discussion proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I consider a recent Evidential Threshold Account of grit, an epistemic attitude that allows agents to bracket out some unsettling evidence about their own chances of success. On this account, grit is rationally permitted only when agents operate in favourable or neutral circumstances. I then demonstrate how this account applies to akratic agents by outlining three clinical case vignettes (Section 3). In light of these vignettes, akrasia appears to be a particularly unfavourable circumstance, to the point of making grit no longer rational, if the Evidential Threshold Account is correct. In Section 4, I introduce my own philosophical account of akrasia as necessarily less-than-successful conduct, a mode of action that avoids straight failure but is never fully successful. I then expand on this idea to show how the epistemically deficient habit of rationalising one's own akrasia leads to motivational perseverance of the wrong kind (Section 5). In Section 6, I contrast and compare my view of akrasia as a long-term process where the akratic conflict remains out of focus for the affected agents with the standard view which insists instead on their full awareness of conflict at the time of action. I argue that the alternative I propose can offer a clearer picture of why akrasia is a case of irrationality, both practical and epistemic, rather than a concealed form of rationality or a sub-personal kind of agency, beyond the scope of rational assessment. In the final Section 7, I return to the question how unsettling evidence is handled in the context of akrasia. I show that a requirement to refrain from grit would lead akratic agents into further irrationality rather than help them get out of their irrational state.

2. The Evidential Threshold Account of Grit

This section will critically explore a recent account of grit put forward in Morton and Paul (2019). On this account, grit is an epistemic attitude of resilience toward evidence that we are not likely to

succeed in projects of ours where we have already invested a lot. The authors highlight the motivational significance of remaining confident in one's own success, especially when faced with difficulties. In other words, it would not be practically rational for agents who have worked toward a challenging long-term objective to give up at the first sign of difficulty. Grit provides such committed agents with an epistemic buffer – they are rationally permitted to set aside unsettling, or contrary evidence about their own prospects of success. This permission, however, is limited. Once their evidence that success is unlikely becomes clear, even committed agents are no longer rationally permitted to resist or downplay it. So, the room for rational grit lies between two epistemic extremes. On the one extreme, an agent places too much weight on contrary evidence, thus compromising her own chances of success by giving up too readily on more demanding, longer-term projects. On the other extreme, however, she pays too little heed to contrary evidence and perseveres in tasks long after her efforts have proven fruitless, thus also undermining her chances of succeeding at some alternative undertaking. Rational grit therefore excludes instances of excessive epistemic resilience where 'we must rely on tactics like avoiding or ignoring the evidence, or nurturing positive illusions about our abilities or the extent of our control' (2019: 183).

To distinguish between the two, Morton and Paul develop their *Evidential Threshold Account*. It tells us that there is a range of rationally permissible ways, or policies of treating contrary evidence once an agent commits to a project. This range varies from the policies available to either an independent observer faced with the same evidence or that same agent before her committing. In either of these two cases the evidential threshold required will be *lower* than that for a committed agent. That is to say, both an observer and an agent who contemplates a particular project should draw negative conclusions about the prospects of this project on grounds that might not be sufficient for a committed agent. Such an agent would be permitted to suspend judgement *as long as* her rationale does not involve any of the tactics listed earlier and, more generally, stirs away from what Morton and Paul (2019: 194) term 'delusional optimism'. Importantly, the higher

evidential threshold to which committed agents are entitled is 'ecologically constrained': to remain epistemically rational, these agents should consider not only the content of the contrary evidence available to them. They should also factor in the overall context in which they operate. This context is agent-specific: what would look like neutral, if not favourable, circumstance for some agents would amount to stark adversity for other agents. Morton and Paul (2019: 200) refer to the vast array of precarious circumstances that would impact on the evidential threshold for committed agents as 'resource scarcity'. This may include poverty or other forms of socioeconomic disadvantage but also traumatic personal experiences or lack of emotional support. Since the evidential threshold of committed agents should be responsive not only to data about their chances of success but also to the context in which these data are to be interpreted, commitment under extreme resource scarcity might not provide greater leeway with respect to contrary evidence. This is the crux of Morton and Paul's argument: once we recognise that evidence is not just content, but content in context, rational grit turns out to be out of reach for agents who apparently need it most. The point is made as follows:

> … it may be that in situations of extreme scarcity agents should have reasoning habits that lead them to remain maximally sensitive to evidence of potential failure even after adopting a difficult goal. Put simply, perseverance may not serve such agents well. One reason is that such environments tend to be more unpredictable, and so the agent's initial assessment of the likelihood of success might be less robustly justified. Another is that for an agent with scarce resources, events that would constitute small setbacks for someone else might be devastating … Given the high stakes of failure, retaining low evidential threshold may be more rational than the alternative… For agents who regularly operate in unsupportive or even discriminatory contexts… grit can lead to the investment of more effort than is effective or healthy. Consequently, it may be that agents in contexts of severe material and emotional scarcity ought not to have an evidential policy that enables grit at the expense of caution or self-protectiveness… they should remain highly responsive to evidence that pure effort will not be enough. (Morton and Paul 2019: 201-2)

The authors admit that this result is 'distressing'. The reasoning habits that would amount to rational grit under more favourable conditions do not support the achievement of agents operating under resource scarcity but lead to their 'over-efforting' instead. As a consequence, the limited resources they have at their disposal are further depleted, in vain.

Morton and Paul (2019) illustrate the link between misplaced grit and over-efforting with patterns of underachievement that affect students from underrepresented groups at elite universities. Unlike their peers from more privileged backgrounds, when faced with good predictive evidence that they are unlikely to complete a competitive course, many of these students do not opt for an alternative that would allow them to satisfy equivalent academic requirements but keep struggling with the original course. As a result, they end up failing their degree.

Following Steele (2010) where this example comes from, Morton and Paul explain this instance of over-efforting as a counterproductive response to 'stereotype threat'. The term was first introduced in Steele and Aronson (1995). It refers to feeling at risk of confirming, as a self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's social group or identity. For instance, in the social psychology experiments conducted and analysed by Steele and Aronson, Black undergraduate students performed worse than their White peers on standardised tests but only when race was made salient in advance of the task. When race was not made salient in this way, Black students performed better than or just as well as White students. The hypothesis put forward by Steele and Aronson is that performance in academic contexts can be impeded by awareness of how one's conduct might be perceived through the lens of identity stereotypes: hence, the term 'stereotype *threat'*. Returning to the example discussed in Morton and Paul (2019), students from underprivileged backgrounds display excessive grit out of fear that by taking the easy way out they would effectively confirm the negative stereotype according to which people like them are not academically strong.

The present discussion will focus on a different set of cases altogether. Agents of interest to us would satisfy the conditions of extreme resource scarcity as defined by Morton and Paul. In addition to lack of emotional support and sometimes material deprivation, this scarcity would however also derive – partly but importantly – from their own records as agents. The feature that these agents have in common is that some exercises of their agency have been affected by a distinct form of akrasia, of which addiction is an example. Drawing on the Evidential Threshold Account we just explored, we should expect that grit cannot be rational for such agents. For even without *notable scarcity in terms of external resources*, akratic agents are subject to *extreme scarcity in terms of internal resources*: poor past performances linked to akrasia cast a shadow over any future commitments of theirs. Yet, there are strong reasons to doubt that grit may not be rational for them. To see what these reasons might be, let us first lay out three fictional case vignettes where agents with addiction try to pursue but ultimately fail at difficult, long-term projects in spite of sincere commitment. I shall then articulate what makes these cases illuminating for akratic agency overall. Expanding on this analysis, I shall return to the question of rational grit to argue *pace* Morton and Paul (2019) that greater resilience to contrary evidence is not only rationally permitted but also required in instances of extreme resource scarcity, such as akrasia.

3. Three Cases of Akrasia

The following vignettes are adapted from Radoilska and Fletcher (2016). Although fictional, they are informed by Fletcher's four-decade-long clinical practice as NHS consultant psychiatrist. Italics will be used to emphasise elements of particular relevance to the underlying question whether grit is rational for akratic agents.

Vignette 1: Mr Miller

Mr Robert Miller is a *65-year-old retired Chief Executive*. His mother died at the age of 82 from 'old age'. His father died at the age of 58 from carcinoma of the oesophagus having been a *heavy drinker throughout his adult life*. Mr Miller was an only child and described a *happy and stable childhood* despite

his father's drinking. He *excelled at school, enjoyed good peer relationships and obtained a first-class honours degree* at University. He married in his late 20s, had two children in his 30s, and *in his mid-40s became the Chief Executive of a national company*. He is described by his family as a *good husband and father*, *with a reputation for honesty, integrity and fairness. Throughout his working life he drank alcohol most days, attributing this to the stress of his job and frequent socialising. In his early 60s he developed a tremor of his hands in the morning which he thought was anxiety. His wife and children became increasingly concerned* about his drinking, especially as he was known *on occasions to drink and drive. Under considerable family pressure* he saw his GP and was *referred for CBT to treat anxiety, stress and depression*. He attended these sessions regularly but *did not find them helpful and his drinking pattern did not change*. Following a blood test to check thyroid function his GP detected markedly deranged liver function tests and referred him to a Consultant Psychiatrist who *diagnosed moderate alcohol dependence. Mr Miller declined the offer of medication, believing that he was strong-willed enough to reduce his drinking on his own*, but he did accept two counselling sessions with a substance misuse liaison worker.

When he was 64 years old, he arrived home one evening after drinking and *fell out of his car in a very intoxicated state*. An ambulance was called, and Mr Miller was taken to the A&E department. *He was 'terrified' that he would be reported to the Police* for driving under the influence of alcohol, but this did not occur. *The shock and embarrassment of this episode led him to accept treatment* advice from his Consultant Psychiatrist, who arranged for a home detoxification followed by treatment with acamprosate 666mgs t.d.s., and disulfiram 200mgs daily which *his wife promised to supervise 'religiously'. For 6 months prior to his retirement Mr Miller complied with treatment.* His wife, however, gave up supervising disulfiram after 3 months as *she had started to 'trust' her husband again. His mood was buoyant, his work performance strong and he looked physically fit, having lost weight. Against the advice* of his Consultant Psychiatrist Mr Miller *stopped taking medication one month prior to retirement* so that he could 'enjoy' his farewell party. This is because, when mixed with alcohol, disulfiram produces strong uncomfortable feelings similar to hangover almost immediately after consumption.

Mr Miller *was convinced that there would be no problems with alcohol after retirement in view of his clinical progress and the future stress-free lifestyle he anticipated. He drank at his retirement party, relapsed back into uncontrolled heavy drinking and spent his early retirement days feeling depressed, deeply ashamed and bored. His very caring family* were desperate for him to stop drinking and *asked his Psychiatrist if he could be 'sectioned'*. After some persuasion Mr Miller had another home detoxification and restarted treatment with acamprosate and supervised disulfiram. *He drank on top of his medication and started to talk about 'checking out'*, by which he meant committing suicide.

Vignette 2: Amy Parker

Amy Parker is a *21-year-old mother of one child*. She never knew her biological father. Her mother had multiple boyfriends who often brought alcohol and drugs into the home. *As a young girl she was given alcohol and was sexually abused by a number of her mother's temporary partners. Her educational performance was poor, and she socialised with a group of students on the fringe of school life.* At the age of 11 she started smoking cigarettes and *as a 13-year-old she self-harmed* by scratching the inside of her thighs with scissors, but this behaviour never came to the attention of her teachers or GP. *By the age of 15 she had used a wide range of 'party' drugs. Social Services* were temporarily involved when Amy was *found living on the streets having stopped going to school. At the age* of *17 she smoked heroin and within 3 months was injecting into her arms and hands.* Amy also used street diazepam, cheap alcohol and occasionally shared a pipe of crack cocaine. When she was 18-years old, she developed a left-sided deep vein thrombosis after injecting into her groin and was *found to be hepatitis C positive. She became pregnant at the age of 19 and this led to a remarkable change in her behaviour.* Amy began to attend a Community Substance Misuse Team (CSMT) where she was started on a methadone prescription. *Her medication was supervised on a daily basis* at a local supermarket pharmacy and the dose was gradually increased to 120 mls methadone mixture 1mg/ml. This, together with the support of a substance misuse worker, appeared to help her stop using heroin and diazepam. A number of consecutive urine and swab tests were negative for illicit drugs. In view of being hepatitis C positive Amy was offered

appointments at her local hospital antenatal department which she attended regularly. *Towards the end of the second trimester she returned to live with her mother. Amy said that she was determined to give her baby the 'best possible chance' and was 'desperate' to be a good mother and to care for her child well*. Throughout her pregnancy Amy received close support from a Community Midwife, Social Services and the CSMT. *By the third trimester she was considered to have made excellent progress*. In view of this, and continuing regular negative tests for illicit drugs, the pick-up regime of methadone was reduced to twice weekly. *A small-for-dates baby boy was born in good health* (apart from a squint) at 38 weeks gestation by spontaneous vaginal delivery. Amy experienced a short period of baby blues and did not take to breast feeding. *Even with close support she found the routine of caring for her baby demanding and exasperating. Within two months of the birth Amy was no longer picking up her methadone on a regular basis and she began to make excuses for failing to attend her key worker appointments* at the CSMT. When she did attend, she said she was exhausted. *A drug screen taken at 12 weeks post-delivery tested positive for heroin, cocaine and diazepam.* Conflict with her mother accelerated when Amy started going out in the evenings leaving the baby in her mother's care. *Her mother told the CSMT that Amy was 'seeing' drug users and dealers* she had relationships with in the past. Despite strenuous efforts and serious warnings from the CSMT, a Health Visitor and Social Workers from the Child Protection Team, *Amy returned to her old pattern of injecting drug use and unstable relationships. Despite Amy's promises of improvement and pleas for clemency her son was eventually removed from her care* and put up for adoption.

Vignette 3: Peter Phillips

Peter Phillips is a *27-year-old, ex-Army Corporal with no family history of psychiatric disorder*. He was an *average student, sporty, popular and outgoing*. After leaving school he joined the British Army and excelled during basic training. He *loved Army life, enjoying the hard work, discipline and camaraderie. At weekends he would drink heavily with his friends, but this did not seem to impact on his work performance.* His military Unit was closely knit, especially after their first tour of duty in Afghanistan. Whilst leading a night patrol during a second tour in Afghanistan, *the soldier behind him stepped on a landmine*. Peter

was spattered with blood and shrapnel fragments but was able to continue. The patrol came under heavy fire and the men ran for cover. Peter found himself in an irrigation channel with two friends. Whilst they attempted to provide covering fire *Peter showed great bravery (later formally recognised), running back to the wounded soldier and dragging him 20 metres into the ditch*. Attempts were made to provide first aid, with tourniquets being applied to both leg stumps, but despite their best efforts *the soldier died*. Following this *Peter said that his nerves were 'shredded'. He felt constantly in danger, irritable, aggressive and guilty*. After the tour in Afghanistan was over the Unit was sent to Cyprus for R&R. Peter *got drunk every day, was argumentative and started getting into fights*. Back in the UK he *lost interest in Army life and continued to drink heavily*. He made the decision to *apply for premature voluntary retirement*. His Unit Medical Officer referred him to a CPN at the military Department of Community Mental Health. The CPN thought that Peter had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) so *provided an abbreviated form of trauma-focussed CBT and suggested to the Unit Medical Officer that a prescription of mirtazapine, 30mgs at night*, might help. *The treatment proved beneficial*. Peter subsequently left the Army but found it *difficult to obtain work*. He continued to suffer *intermittent nightmares* of the incident in Afghanistan and *drank half a bottle of vodka most nights as he was 'frightened to go to sleep'*. He was *unable to maintain a stable relationship* with a girlfriend and due to continuing unemployment, he came under *financial pressure. His previous symptoms of PTSD returned 'with a vengeance'. His drinking spiralled out of control, he wet the bed regularly* and suffered a bad bout of pancreatitis after which *his GP told him to 'completely and permanently abstain from alcohol'*. However, *Peter considered that using alcohol was the only way he could get to sleep and suppress the vivid memories, sense of danger, jumpiness and anxiety* he experienced. Peter was *arrested after attacking a stranger* in a pub who criticised the Army and he ended up on a Probation Order. His Probation Officer arranged for referral to Psychological Services but, *after waiting 4 months for an assessment, Peter was told that nothing could be done for him until he stopped drinking*. Following referral to a Community Substance Misuse Team he *received an in-patient detoxification during which he was re-referred to Psychological Services*. Peter continuing to have nightmares of Afghanistan, feelings of anger and aggression, and panic attacks. He *kept away from all reminders of*

military life and avoided watching TV news programmes. *Within two weeks of leaving the detoxification unit he started to drink a bottle of vodka a day. He was again turned away from Psychological Services because of his alcohol consumption.* Peter has *managed to get a job* as a Car Park attendant *but is still drinking very heavily and suffering from PTSD. He says he 'hates the taste' of alcohol and wants to stop drinking, but he fears he might kill himself* as he cannot cope with his nightmares, loneliness and sense of guilt.

4. Akrasia as necessarily less-than-successful conduct

As shown by the vignettes, none of the agents succeeds in their respective endeavours. For instance, Mr Miller (Vignette 1) ignores his 'drink problem', then tries to solve it by himself – unsuccessfully, looks for professional help, gets on the way to recovery, relapses, and ultimately, gives up trying. The pattern of good initial progress followed by relapse and despair is also replicated in Vignettes 2 and 3. This section will aim to shed light on lack of success as distinctive feature of the exercises of agency illustrated in all three cases, exercises that we may qualify as akratic. To do so, I will expand on the account of *akrasia as necessarily less-than-successful conduct that could manifest itself in patterns of either weakness of will or addiction* I proposed in Radoilska (2013). In essence, the central feature we encounter across these closely related phenomena is understood as follows.

First, being necessarily less-than-successful qualifies a conduct or a particular strand of a person's agency, for instance excessive use of alcohol and related behaviours like drinking in secret from family rather than this person's agency overall. Second, being necessarily less-than-successful points to a distinctive kind of agency, the manifestations of which cannot be fully successful to the extent that they arise at all. They avoid straight failure; yet they do not qualify as achievements. In this sense, akrasia can be aptly defined as *perseverance of the wrong kind*. What is missing here is the openness to both success and failure that comes with engaging in a new project. So even if akratic conduct cannot be successful, it still provides a degree of certainty in getting at least something that is not readily available to agents.[i] This certainty is akin to the sense of familiarity or *feeling at*

home afforded by some habitual behaviours (cf. Carlisle 2014). Having said that, it is important to note that *if akrasia is a habit, it is neither unthinking, nor 'out of control', but a distinctive mode of perceiving, interpreting, feeling, reasoning and doing* that results in necessarily less-than-successful conduct.[ii] The reason for this becomes apparent when we take seriously 'achievement' as unifying idea that underpins all credible manifestations of agency (cf. Bradford 2015). Any action in this broad sense is meant to be a kind of *achievement*, at least on its own terms. *Agential success* here is defined across two complementary axes: not only *production* (bringing about an effect), but also *assertion* (an agent's articulating a particular commitment of theirs). Only when these two axes are well-aligned is an action successful on its own terms. Such an action would amount to *actualisation on the part of the agent*: her effecting a change in the world articulates a commitment of hers. By contrast, when production and assertion are misaligned in a distinctive and sustained way, rather than just coming apart, the ensuing actions are necessarily less-than-successful. The misalignment defining akrasia takes the following form: *the relevant conduct is successful as production to the extent that it is unsuccessful as assertion*. Following on from this account, addiction looks like *a recalcitrant and particularly frustrating form of secondary akrasia* that derives from a considerable difficulty, if not subjective inability to address an initial conflict between *valuing* (the assertive dimension of agential success) and *intending* (the productive dimension of agential success).

Returning to Case Vignette 1 for illustration, when Mr Miller goes off his medication to enjoy his retirement party, what he does is successful in terms of production (he drinks alcohol at the party) to the extent that it is also unsuccessful in terms of assertion (it undermines his sincere commitment to a life free from alcohol). Importantly, the underlying conflict between assertion and production, valuing and intending is not immediately apparent to an akratic agent. Although neither complete, nor present in every instance of addictive conduct, this *lack of self*-awareness is significant. It brings together two prominent features in the phenomenology of secondary akrasia which are also present in our three Case Vignettes: *frustration at one's own actions coupled with a sense of hopelessness for the future*. These features point to an underlying conflict between assertion and

production that stays out of focus and, instead of being addressed, keeps coming back to eventually solidify into necessarily less-than-successful conduct. The ensuing sense of under-achievement often serves as inducement to further necessarily less-than-successful exercises of one's agency. As pointed out earlier, albeit it frustrating, this conduct comes with a reliable outcome. This might not be what akratic agents appreciate or even want. It is nevertheless something that they can cling on to. Recall Case Vignette 3: Peter hates the taste of alcohol and wants to stop drinking even though he never spends a day of abstinence outside of the clinic.

5. Akratic self-awareness and rationalisation

At first blush, it might seem paradoxical that frustration at one's own actions does not offer a platform for the realignment of actual plans to sincere commitments. On closer look, however, it becomes clear that experiences such as these feed back into the lack of self-awareness that typically accompanies necessarily less-than-successful conduct. For they help mask the underlying conflict between its assertive and productive dimensions. The latter are seemingly broken down into *separate one-dimensional actions* whose outcomes would not strike us as mutually exclusive. This kind of redescription defines the retirement party planning by Mr Miller: the party is treated as a one-off occasion, which in one sense it clearly is. This, however, does not apply to drinking alcohol, which in Mr Miller's case has been a near daily routine for decades. By failing to appreciate that drinking alcohol at his retirement party is an instance of the same necessarily less-than-successful conduct that he is trying to overcome, Mr Miller makes further instances such as this more likely to occur. And as we learn from the vignette, the relapse indeed leads to a sense of shame and hopelessness that in turn underwrite further necessarily less-than-successful actions of his.

In fact, we can already see at the start of Case Vignette 1 how akrasia gets reinterpreted as separate actions that belie the underlying process. Mr Miller accounts for his regular alcohol consumption as goal-directed response to specific events in his professional life, such as frequent socialising with business partners. Following this line of thought, he does not anticipate drinking alcohol after

his retirement. This partly explains his unpreparedness to address the recurring episodes of alcohol consumption during the first months of his retirement. For, on the goal-directed, action-by-action redescription Mr Miller was giving to his drinking, these episodes would not happen once the rationale for consuming alcohol – keeping up with professional obligations – no longer applied to him. What transpires at this point is that necessarily less-than-successful conduct is undergirded by a stable, self-fulfilling mechanism that makes alternative approaches to agential achievement, to which success and failure are equally open, far riskier and less attractive as a result.

Recent work on rationalisation shows that relevantly similar mechanisms might be at work more widely, maintaining less-than-successful exercises of individual agency that would not qualify as akratic in the strict sense. As Schwitzgebel and Ellis (2017: 170) point out:

> Rationalisation occurs when a person favours a particular conclusion as a result of some factor (such as self-interest) that is of little justificatory epistemic relevance. The thinker then seeks an adequate justification for that conclusion but the very factor responsible for her favouring it now biases how the research for justification unfolds. As a result of an epistemically illegitimate investigation, the person identifies and endorses a justification that makes no mention of the distorting factor that has helped guide her search.

There is a potential dissonance here between three categories of reasons: 1) actual *motivating reasons* that the process of rationalisation keeps out of focus; 2) *explanatory reasons* that make this process intelligible on reflection; and 3) *justificatory reasons* that the agent appropriates post factum (cf. Alvarez 2013) . On this picture of *reasons for belief and action*, rationalisation would be especially pernicious when it papers over not just some dissonance but straight contradiction between different categories of reasons. The upshot is to make detection and eventual resolution extremely unlikely. As Schwitzgebel and Ellis (2017: 171) observe, rationalisation not only 'obstructs the critical evaluation of one's own reasoning'; in addition, 'it impedes the productive exchange of reasons and ideas among well-meaning interlocutors'.

Being *necessarily* less-than-successful, akratic conduct rests on this kind of more pernicious rationalisation that obscures akratic agents' self-understanding as conflicted and precludes their effective communication with meaningful others. As illustrated by Case Vignette 1, these two trends go hand in hand. By rationalising his daily alcohol consumption as an efficient and context-dependent means to secure professional goals, Mr Miller blocks the realisation that this routine clearly jeopardises important commitments of his. This rationalisation succeeds in reducing the visibility of the conflict between assertion and production, valuing and intending from the first-person perspective of the akratic agent himself. This ambivalent success, however, is achieved at the expense of a related failure: Mr Miller must remain at odds with his family and keep ignoring, for as long as possible, that he has a problem with alcohol.

The proposed analysis explains why the action-by-action redescription of one's own akratic conduct paints akratic actions as either fully successful (e.g. Mr Miller's take on his drinking before the A&E episode) or clear failures (e.g. Mr Miller's view on his continuing to drink after retirement). For redescriptions such as these require that success in action is interpreted as one-dimensional and dependent on a single question, on this occasion, that of whether the intended outcome is achieved or not.

Importantly, even if the implicit notion of agential success at work here is scalar to allow for degrees of achievement rather than binary, this additional nuance would not be enough to transcend the limitations of the one-dimensional model on which success in action is assessed. As a consequence, akratic incentives are not identified as subclass of a distinctive category of reasons, explanatory ones. Explanatory reasons, also known as *'reasons why'* (cf. Dancy 2000) lead to action without necessarily motivating it in a way that is transparent to the agent. For instance, I might stay at home instead of joining a party because I forgot about it or because I find social interactions too demanding. In each of these cases, the reason which explains my staying at home is *not a reason, in the light of which I act*. This is fairly obvious in the first scenario, where I simply forget about the

party. By contrast, in the second scenario, I might be tempted to rationalise my staying at home by pointing to a good (normative) reason I could have had for doing so, such as needing to rest or to complete a piece of work with a pressing deadline. The problem with this rationalisation of mine is that it misdescribes what I do by misrepresenting my motives. This reason-swapping also undermines my self-understanding as an agent: *I can keep engaging in less-than-successful conduct*, such as avoiding parties *without realising that this is what I am effectively doing.*

In a similar vein, the failure to recognise akratic incentives as fundamentally explanatory rather than either motivating or normative reasons is part of the underlying mechanism that obfuscates the necessary correlation between successful production and unsuccessful assertion in akrasia. One-dimensional models of action, whether attuned to a binary or a scalar notion of success, do not offer a corrective. Instead, they inadvertently reinforce the pernicious rationalisation that fuels akrasia.[iii]

6. Acting against one's better judgment as puzzle of practical irrationality

Before returning to grit and its putative irrationality for akratic agents, there are two related questions we need to consider. First, how does the account of akrasia employed in the preceding vignette analysis relate to the standard account, according to which akrasia consists in *acting against one's better judgement at the time of action*? And second, why rely on this alternative account rather than the standard one when addressing the issue of whether grit is irrational for akratic agents?

The standard account of akrasia introduced in Davidson (1970/2001) and further developed in Mele (1987), focusses on discrete, self-contained actions that take place in a short space of time, such as the following:[iv]

One Drink Too Many

Alex has an important presentation to make next day early in the morning. Before heading back home after work, her colleagues invite her to join them for a drink. She decides to go out but have

no more than two drinks as she knows that drinking any more will affect the quality of her performance next morning. As the evening progresses, she is offered a third drink, which, after a brief moment of hesitation, she takes. Against her better judgment, she ends up having a fourth drink as well.

The akratic conflict here is meant to be stark. The action goes against the agent's own better judgment. It is also *free and uncompelled*. And, since it all happens at the same time, it bears the hallmarks of an *enacted head-on contradiction* that singles out akrasia as *paradigm case of practical irrationality*.

This is a neat, theoretically attractive picture. Yet, part of its appeal derives from leaving the phenomena under consideration fundamentally under-described. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to offer a sustained argument in support of this claim.[v] Instead, I shall briefly outline the advantages of filling in the standard account in the way proposed earlier. One of these advantages derives from *conceiving akrasia as a process that unfolds over time rather than a series of one-off events*. This is not to say that acting against one's better judgment never takes the form suggested by scenarios, such as One Drink Too Many. The interest of a *diachronic interpretation* is instead to indicate that on many occasions the akratic conflict is not immediately apparent and can be seen for what it is only if a longer-term view on exercises of agency is adopted. As shown by the vignettes we considered, first-personal rationalisations of the akratic process contribute to an action-by-action redescription, where the underling conflict is diffused: the akratic agent seems to be doing first one thing for a good reason and then, at a later time, another, very different thing, for a good reason also. All of these instances of akrasia are likely to slip under the radar on the *synchronic understanding* implied by the standard account. For cases, such as One Drink Too Many are only the tip of the iceberg. By focussing on them as central, we are likely to lose sight of how different facets of akratic conduct fit together and why this amounts to practical irrationality.

Addressing this issue is another, related advantage of conceiving akrasia in terms of necessarily less-than-successful conduct. It helps solve a fundamental puzzle put forward by Davidson (2001): practical irrationality is difficult to pin down. If we explain its instances too readily, we turn it into a concealed type of rationality. If, by contrast, we treat these instances as ultimately unintelligible, we reallocate them to the domain of non-rationality or sub-personal agency. We observed a relevantly similar tension in Case Vignette 1. Mr Miller's early rationalisation of his akratic conduct presents it as fully rational albeit unorthodox goal-directed behaviour. By contrast, his family's request to have him sectioned as well as his own later despair at failing to stop drinking relegate a cluster of his agency to something regrettable that is merely happening to him. In either case, a central feature of akrasia is missed out: the conduct to which it gives rise is *criticisable in virtue of being irrational by the akratic agent's own lights*. Scenarios like One Drink Too Many are good at highlighting the puzzle; however, this is achieved at the expense of simplifying it. The synchronic approach to akrasia is only part of the problem. For the notion of akratic conflict as head-on contradiction, on which this approach rests, also suggests that akrasia is *fundamentally motivational* an issue: the agent sees the better course of action and yet engages in an opposite and inferior one. As a consequence, the epistemic dimension of akrasia is left unattended. Yet, looking at the preceding vignettes, akratic agents' knowledge of their own actions is compromised in a distinctive way. Moreover, this is a constitutive feature of the phenomenon rather than a by-product of it. Being able to account for the interactions between the motivational and the epistemic aspects of akrasia is crucial for understanding it as practical irrationality without over-emphasising its proximity to either rationality or non-rationality. Rethinking akrasia as necessarily less-than-successful conduct rather than merely an individual action undertaken against one's own better judgment offers a promising ground for such an account.[vi]

7. Grit and the akratic handling of evidence

Having explored a possible account of akrasia as necessarily less-than-successful conduct, in light of three case vignettes, we can now appreciate fully the challenge presented by the Evidential Threshold Account of grit outlined at the start of this paper. To recap, according to this Account, committed agents are rationally permitted to handle adverse evidence in a different way than impartial observers or even the same agents before committing. The difference consists in a higher threshold for treating such evidence as decisive in the case of committed agents. For, once they assess a long-term project of theirs as very unlikely to succeed in the light of newly acquired evidence, they have to give up, in spite of the time and effort they have already expended on it. By contrast, when faced with evidence that speaks against a particular undertaking, both observers and not yet committed agents only need to redirect their attention without incurring any loss. The distinction between committed and non-committed agents comes with an important caveat. The higher threshold provision concerning adverse evidence does not apply uniformly to all committed agents. Those operating under conditions of extreme resource scarcity are excluded from it. What rationality requires from them is to continue handling contrary evidence as non-committed agents or mere observers would.

This modified requirement should also apply to akratic agents. As the preceding discussion shows, they fully satisfy the conditions of extreme resource scarcity set out by the Evidential Threshold Account. In many cases, of which Vignettes 2 and 3 are examples, this would include reduced external resources, such as unsupportive environment and financial strain. However, as Vignette 1 illustrates, even in cases where akratic agents do not suffer from extreme external scarcity, they would still be subject to extreme internal scarcity generated by their own record of necessarily less-than-successful conduct. And as we pointed out earlier, this conduct demonstrates perseverance of the wrong kind. So, it would seem natural to conclude that epistemic resilience would only hinder akratic agents who better stay alert to contrary evidence as rational, non-committed agents would.

In spite of its initial appeal, this possible conclusion is open to a challenge. Assuming a *normative understanding of rationality*, there should be a point to being rational. Things should go better for agents who heed what rationality requires, not worse. The underlying expectation covers not only what we might term *steadily rational exercises of agency*. It is even more to the point when agents have strayed away and are now trying to get back on track. As Broome (2007: 365) observes: 'Just because you are in an irrational state, that does not mean rationality can be expected to impose conflicting requirements on you. You should expect rationality to require you to get out of your irrational state, not to get in deeper, into … further irrationality'.

Turning to akratic agents, this normative expectation looks like the following: Just because they have a record of necessarily less-than-successful conduct, thus operating under (at least internal but probably also external) resource scarcity, that does not mean rationality can be expected to impose conflicting requirements upon them. They should expect rationality to require them to get out of their practically irrational state of akrasia, not to get in deeper, into further irrationality.

The requirement to forgo grit, however, does seem to require akratic agents to get in deeper into further irrationality. As highlighted earlier, Morton and Paul (2019: 202) admit that grit's unsuitability to the pursuit of difficult goals under extreme resource scarcity is a distressing finding. In light of the present discussion, this admission points to a normative conflict that the Evidential Threshold Account ultimately imposes on committed agents that meet with a lot of adversity. For it asks such agents to keep low evidential threshold when deciding whether to give up on demanding goals that their context has made even harder to achieve. Looking at instances of akrasia, this implicit contradiction cannot be adequately explained as a tension that results from the irrational state in which the affected agents find themselves, independently of this Account's requirement on how they should handle contrary evidence. Instead, the contradiction is introduced by the requirement itself: As your evidence points out, you are in a desperate situation, so do not try to protect yourself from despair!

To see why grit is, after all, rational for akratic agents, let us look back at the overall shape relevant exercises of agency take across our three vignettes. In all cases, we witness the undertaking of a difficult long-term objective – overcoming one's necessarily less-than-successful conduct that has become a clear threat either to specific core commitments (Vignettes 1 and 2) or to getting on with one's life overall (Vignette 3). This undertaking, however, ends up uniformly in failure, in spite of some initial success. How is this shape of agency to be explained? Is it plausible to submit that things go wrong for the akratic agents because of excessive, viz. irrational grit?

Such an explanation might seem supported by the impact rationalisation has on akratic agents' self-awareness as conflicted agents. As argued earlier, such agents tend to redescribe their necessarily less-than-successful conduct in terms of self-standing actions aimed at particular outcomes. These redescriptions make the akratic conflict less conspicuous and more manageable from the agents' own perspective. At the same time, however, they entrench akratic conduct further. For, the inverse correlation between unsuccessful assertion and successful production that underpins it does not come to the agents' attention. Clearly, the akratic handling of evidence here is wanting. What is less clear is that the shortcoming results from inappropriate epistemic resilience. For there are no traces of delusional optimism in the vignettes. I take this observation to be self-evident regarding Vignettes 2 and 3: neither Amy, nor Peter overestimate their chances of success at any point. A strong case can also be made regarding Vignette 1: Mr Miller takes himself to be strong-willed enough to cut down on alcohol without medical help. With hindsight, his self-assessment is proven wrong; however, there is no reason to attribute this error to irrational grit: contrary evidence, such as frequent relapses has not yet become available. What is more, as a high-achiever, Mr Miller has a lot of evidence to support his self-belief.

If undue epistemic resilience is not the source of trouble for these akratic agents, how are we then to account for their failures to achieve the goals to which they have committed? Here is a possible alternative: akratic agents tend to fail because of their handling of evidence; in particular, they keep

applying low threshold to contrary evidence after commitment, as the Evidential Threshold Account requires from them. As the following discussion will aim to demonstrate, this approach is epistemically irrational since it takes evidential content out of its original context; it is also practically irrational since it paints one's own project as ineffectual trying and, as a result, promotes self-fulfilling despair.

The agents in all three vignettes have a feature in common: They keep a close eye on their own less-than-successful performances, both past and present. These are treated not just as indicative evidence of how they are likely to perform in the future. In fact, this evidence is accorded high predictive value and treated as conclusive. This shared pattern of contrary evidence handling is apparent in the overwhelming effect that first significant setbacks have in Vignettes 1 and 2. Mr Miller reverts to uncontrolled heavy drinking once it becomes clear that his life after retirement will not be plain sailing. Amy resumes her use of illicit drugs soon after she discovers that looking after a baby is much harder than she anticipated. Vignette 3 is even more to the point. Peter never attempts to stop drinking outside of the clinic: as bad as it is, drinking has so far helped him resist the urge of committing suicide. Peter's evidence handling is fully consistent with what the Evidential Threshold Account recommends for agents who, like him, operate under conditions of extreme resource scarcity. Yet, it amounts to sinking deeper into further irrationality rather than addressing the underlying akratic conflict.

Following this line of thought, we can now clearly see why akratic rationalisations derive from giving too much credence to contrary evidence rather than ignoring or underestimating it. Peter redescribes his routine alcohol intake as a means to an end, a straightforward action as production, not a conflicted exercise of agency. Nevertheless, he acknowledges it as a means of last resort. But seeing oneself as someone with no alternatives can only support perseverance of the wrong kind, that of necessarily less-than-successful conduct.

It might be objected that, albeit distressing, Peter's conclusion is not epistemically irrational: he is indeed in a bad way. His conclusion, however, goes further than this admittedly accurate assessment: there is no other way to keep going than drinking oneself unconscious. This over-pessimistic account is the upshot of keeping one's threshold for contrary evidence low when operating under conditions of extreme resource scarcity. For such a policy contributes to a pair of harmful (and irrational) reasoning habits. The first is to focus on evidence that is partial, inconclusive and context-sensitive in the wrong way. The second is to ignore one's position as agent when assessing evidence relative to own actions. Let us explore each habit in turn.

Keeping a close eye on evidence that one is unlikely to succeed has an obvious flipside: being less sensitive to evidence in one's favour. For this low evidential threshold is not meant to be applied uniformly but to capture putative contrary evidence. As a consequence, supportive evidence is acknowledged as such at a higher threshold. Moreover, in all cases the agents are looking at probable future states of affairs, not facts. So, no matter how strong adverse evidence they encounter, this evidence is, by definition, inclusive. This point is unlikely to register with them as long as they stick to a low threshold for contrary evidence which of course abounds under conditions of extreme scarcity.

The underlying reasoning habit also affects how evidence that registers is assessed. It is not calibrated to the task that akratic agents are effectively engaged in. To appreciate what the stakes are, let us briefly consider an example from the literature on skill. In an illuminating paper, Hawley (2003) sketches the following scenario: to escape from ruthless assailants, a person has to manage to drive away on a frozen lake, while under heavy fire. The question whether she can drive in these action-movie circumstances is categorically different from that whether she can drive tout court. It would be misleading to think of driving as one and the same task performed in different circumstances. For such an understanding is likely to lead us to underestimate the gap between standard of success in the extraordinary case as opposed to that in the ordinary one. For instance,

failure to perform well in the former is no evidence against this person's likelihood to succeed in the latter.

Returning to the issue of contrary evidence handling in the context of akrasia, there is a valuable lesson we can learn from the preceding thought experiment. Akratic agents treat the projects they have committed to as difficult only in the sense of their own poor prospects to succeed. In so doing, they end up assessing their performances as though failing at another, much easier (and irrelevant) task, such as refraining from alcohol when things go well, in the absence of alcohol dependence. In contrast, if what they are trying to achieve were to be considered in its original context, missteps would be judged less harshly and their predictive value, more readily questioned.

Let us now move to the second and related reasoning habit, ignoring one's position when handling evidence about the odds of being successful as an agent. There is something distinctly disempowering in thinking about one's own commitments primarily as a matter to settle by weighing up evidence, like an impartial observer would. For unlike observers, agents have the power to influence the relevant course of events: they make things happen in virtue of their acting. So, when considering how projects of theirs might unfold, agents are not confined to the available evidence that speaks in favour of or against a happy end.[vii] To require them to inhabit such a detached perspective, on pain of irrationality, amounts to undoing their standing as agents. At the very least, it generates the conditions for split-up, if not conflicted exercises of agency. If I am trying to get something done while looking for signs that I would better give up, my trying cannot be wholehearted. And when the project that I am engaged in is difficult anyway, my keeping watch for contrary evidence is likely to turn what I am doing into just trying. But seeing myself trying and never succeeding is likely to push me toward more predictable undertakings.[viii] In this context, necessarily less-than-successful conduct could offer such an agent much-needed certainty.

8. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I argued that akrasia is best understood as necessarily less-than-successful conduct. Akratic actions are successful as productions to the extent that they are unsuccessful as assertions. By treating these actions as parts of a longer-term process of rationalisation instead of paradoxical one-off events, it becomes possible to investigate the epistemic side of the phenomenon along with its better researched motivational side. Reflecting on a series of case vignettes, I tested the initially plausible claim that grit or epistemic resilience might not be rational for akratic agents since – as a result of their akrasia – they should remain alert to contrary evidence that projects of theirs are unlikely to succeed. In the light of a normative understanding of rationality according to which being rational should benefit agents, it transpired, however, that refraining from grit would only make akratic agents worse off. This is because the rationalisations that underpin their necessarily less-than-successful conduct already overexpose them to contrary evidence. A requirement to stay focussed on such evidence when pursuing difficult goals can only amplify the disempowering effects of rationalisation.

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[i] In this respect, there is superficial resemblance between akratic conduct and skilled agency, viz. secure competence. See, for instance, Raz (2012, p. 2012): 'We acquire and are aware of having a sphere of secure competence, consisting of a range of actions that, in normal circumstances, we reliably expect that we shall successfully perform if we set out to perform them, barring competence-defeating events (which are very rare).' For, the reliability that comes with akratic conduct is not that of success but that of not ending up with nothing.

[ii] See Pollard (2010) for an account of habit as a complex disposition across various manifestations of agency. Douskos (2017) adds on an insightful contrast between such an understanding of habit and existing notions of skill.

[iii] I speak of one-dimensional models in the plural as pernicious rationalisation of the kind described here may also be supported by an underlying understanding of *action as assertion only* rather than production as the case is in Vignette 1. To see how this might work, let us briefly consider Vignette 2: Amy's lack of self-

awareness as conflicted agent is grounded in her sense of whole-hearted commitment to be a good mother and to give her baby the best chance in life (normative-cum-motivating reason). Akratic incentives (explanatory reasons) are then dismissed as (normatively) insignificant, which in turn makes their enduring efficacy even more perplexing from the point of the akratic agent. And since Amy continues to operate with a one-dimensional model of action as assertion, she assumes that the issue lies with the very object of her commitment: looking after her baby is experienced as an exhausting and exasperating activity.

[iv] The standard account of akrasia is sometimes presented as a theoretical offshoot from Ancient Greek treatments of the topic, in particular that by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7 (2001). Yet, the relationship is far more complex, with several points of contrast, for instance, unlike Ancient Greek discussions of akrasia, contemporary counterparts tend to see the issue as one of rationality rather than morality. Charles (1984) offers an illuminating analysis of Aristotle's theory of action in comparison to that of Donald Davidson, which until recently dominated the contemporary debate. See also Hoffmann (2008) where major views on akrasia throughout the history of Western philosophy are critically explored in their original intellectual contexts.

[v] See, however, Radoilska (2013).

[vi] See Holton (2009) for an alternative diachronic conception of the phenomenon. Its irrationality is interpreted in terms of irresoluteness instead of perseverance of the wrong kind: akratic agents change their minds too readily. This conception helps solve some of the difficulties faced by the standard synchronic account. However, it still prioritises the motivational dimension of the phenomenon at the expense of its epistemic significance.

[vii] See Radoilska (2017) for an argument in favour of treating beliefs about one's own actions as a special case where the truth norm can be satisfied in two ways: not only by following the available evidence that something is or is not the case but also by making that something is or is not the case through the exercise of one's own agency. For instance, I typically do not need to consider any evidence to conclude (correctly) that I will fulfil a promise of mine. My commitment to do so suffices as long as what I have promised to do resides within the sphere of my secure competence (see note ii above).

[viii] When just trying, one can get lucky but not really succeed. See Yaffe (2010, Ch.9) on the distinction between inadequate and impossible attempts. Applying this distinction, we could say that the attitude of 'just trying' turns relevant actions into impossible rather than merely inadequate attempts.